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THE SPEECH

OF

KERSAINT

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TO THE

Convention

de Kersaint.

French National Convention,

WITH THE

RESOLUTIONS

OF THAT BODY RESPECTING A WAR

WITH

ENGLAND.

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THE
S P E E C H
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K E R S A I N T
TO THE
French National Convention.

THE National Convention transmit to you (*the Members of the Executive Council*) the report of the Minister for Foreign Affairs on the conduct of the English Government, together with the proposition I have had the honour to submit to you, for the purpose of preparing for a naval war, if the safety and the dignity of the Republic should render such a measure necessary.

I shall divide my sentiments on this very important subject into two parts. In the first, I shall endeavour to point out the designs of the English Minister. In the second, I shall consider the probable consequences that will ensue from the war with which we are now threatened.

Should the Court of London declare war against us, we shall immediately ascertain what Maritime Powers coalesce; we may also rest assured, that we shall have to contend

contend with them all, and at one period—of their number—of their hostile inclinations I entertain no doubt : I entertain doubts only of the extent of their power. The Governments of England, of Spain, of Holland, of Russia, of Portugal, are all your enemies, for they are all * * *—of these, however, let us concentrate our attention on the most powerful ; let us direct our view to that Government that waxes the rod of power over a people, who, enjoying a degree of Liberty, have on that account been formidable to us in a period when we were slaves ; let us consider well the extent of the resources of this Government ; let us develop its intention ; let us attempt to discover the object to which they tend. In the conduct of the English Government, I perceive the action of three distinct principles, all foreign, I hope, to the inclinations of the People of England.

1. The hatred which the King of England bears towards the French, and the apprehensions entertained by his Majesty with respect to the security of his Crown ; apprehensions which have alone occasioned his sincere regard for Louis XVI ; a regard that has received an accession of strength from the support of those natural and declared enemies of France, the members of the Aristocracy and Episcopacy of England.

2. The alarm and uneasiness of the Prime Minister, Mr. Pitt, who for eight years has reigned Lord Paramount of England, and whose fall is alike threatened by the tempests of a revolution, and the storms of a war. This second principle is connected with the first, by the Aristocracy of Finance, and by those numerous agents whom those men find it necessary to employ ; and this knot, in the event of a war, will receive such a degree of tension, that England will endeavour to resist in vain.

3. The ambition and the genius of Mr. Fox, and the intrigues of Opposition, who take advantage of every event that tends to diminish the popularity of the English Minister ; who having artfully encouraged hopes and expectations of Reformation, in order to agitate the minds of the people, have converted those hopes and those expectations into fears and apprehensions. This consequence
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which they did not foresee has left them at the mercy of the English Government, and has drawn upon their heads a chastisement sufficient to convince free men of the dangers of party and of intrigue. If we seek the cause of this effect, perhaps fatal to the world, we shall find it in the character of that great orator, who, by the force of genius, keeps alive the reputation of a party, the last weak support of the defenders of the Liberty of England.—The friend of Men, the parasite of Kings, the vigorous opposer of the English Administration, the superstitious admirer of the English Constitution, a popular Aristocrate, a Democratic Loyalist; Mr. Fox has but one object in view, that of hurling his rival from his throne, and of retrieving at once so many Parliamentary defeats, not less injurious to his interest than inimical to his reputation.

In this eventful period, his more prudent antagonist must bring the whole extent of his power into action. He must court popularity, while he cherishes the Aristocracy of his party. He must bow to Royalty, even while he waves the wand of despotism. In the midst of war, should a war take place, he must endeavour to preserve his power undiminished, and whatever events may happen, he must be possessed of the same ascendancy which the Opposition attack even in the bosom of peace.

In England it is a fact so well known, as to be an established axiom in politics, that the Minister who declares war never sees the end of it. Mr. Pitt knows that a war will put a period to the existence of his power. Mr. Pitt consequently would willingly avoid a war. But what is the will of other interested parties? The King desires a * * for obvious reasons. Mr. Fox would draw the Minister into an ambuscade, and force him to defend the unpopular conduct of Government. Mr. Pitt, with a hope of not being reduced to the necessity of a war, offers to mediate among the Belligerent Powers. He knows that all the members of Administration are his tools; he possesses eloquence, the key of the Treasury, and the theory of corruption. The Satellites that move around him, Emigrants from France, and the Aristocrates of England, point out to him two modes of conduct, both of which
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he means to adopt. The one is to arrest us in our rapid career of victory by land, by threatening us with a naval war. The other is, to bring us, by dint of his mediation, to terms of accommodation with our enemies.

These ideas have seduced him.—The *Bird's Eye prospect* that has been afforded him of our situation, has induced him to consider success certain; and indeed, our internal agitations, the apparent disorder that has infused itself into our Legislative discussions, the amount of our expences, the quarrels of parties; all these external characteristics of one of the most violent convulsions, that ever agitated the political body of any Nation, in some degree justify his expectations. But he forgets that a sense of public danger will re-unite us. He forgets that those agitations, which have made so much noise, express the extent of our strength; a strength that can never belong to a body enfeebled by disorder and disease. He forgets, that though our expences are great, they bear very little proportion to our resources. He forgets that France has but one voice, and that we possess still several millions, of which we cannot make a more honourable use than by employing them in the establishment of our independence, both external and internal. He forgets that the number of our enemies, instead of discouraging us, will stimulate us to activity more energetic, and will call our resources into action more vigorous and effectual. He forgets that a people who stretch forth their arm with one accord, who unanimously venture their lives and fortunes in the common cause, can never, never be subdued. Finally, he forgets that we can never want soldiers or money, and that the number of our enemies cannot appall men who are placed in the glorious necessity of being forced to conquer or die.

If England, without any provocation, in contempt of the Law of Nations, declares war against us, remember, O my Countrymen, the conduct of Cortez, who set fire to his ships in the presence of his troops just landed on the plains of Mexico.

Having now considered the situation of the English Government, suffer me to attach your attention to the dispositions of the English people, are not yet reduced

to that state of degradation to pass for nothing in the consideration of an impending rupture with this country.— We are accustomed by the generic name of English to mean three different descriptions of people, whom nature has separated, whom force has re-united, whom interest incessantly disunites, and whom the principles of our revolution have affected in a very different manner.

The English people, like all conquerors, have for a long while oppressed Scotland and Ireland; but it is necessary to remark that these two latter nations, always restless and secretly revolting at the injustice of the English, have acquired at different epochs conceptions which permit them now to hope that they shall at length obtain their ancient independence.—I pause not here to make observations on the differences which agitate Ireland and England. Every one is acquainted with the Parliament of Ireland, her Lord Lieutenant, and that species of Liberty which she procured by force during the American war. But every one does not know the machinations used by the Parliament of England to arrest the operation of the natural industry of Ireland, and to check the extension of her commerce. The Catholics of that country are still subject to the Gothic and barbarous laws of those intolerant days in which they were enacted; and in this *half-way* state of independence, they seem, with eyes directed towards us, to say, “Come, shew yourselves, and we shall be free.”

The Scotch groan under other sorrows. Ever since the Union, Scotland has been represented in Parliament, but in a manner so disproportionate to her wealth, her extent, and her population, that she is not in fact any more than a colony dependant on England; the Scotch, however, know their rights, and the amount of their resources. The principles of the French Revolution have been firmly defended in that country, and those defenders have been honoured with the first persecutions of the English Government; but these persecutions have made converts, and no where a has greater satisfaction at our successes been evinced than in the cities of Scotland, in the chief of which public illuminations have been made.

Ireland

Ireland and Scotland, attentive to the progress of the French Revolution, know in what manner we have spoken of the English people. It will be difficult to persuade them that it is necessary, in contempt of all the principles of Equity, to pay fresh taxes to carry on a war against us, because we have procured for a people the use of a river that gives them a free communication with the ocean, and opens even to the English a more direct mode of communication with the Belgic Provinces. But are the English people speaking openly, in a temperament of mind hostile to the French? or, can the English Government direct that temperament at will? I must confess that the inhabitants of London and of the principal Cities of England, have conducted themselves in the present crisis with profound address—such is the power of the English Government that it is almost omnipotent—it binds a multitude of men by the chain of interest.—The mercantile and revenue Aristocracy abound in greater proportion in England than they did in France previous to the Revolution of 1789—these men are now the auxiliaries of the Court and the Parliament; and they make a great noise about our confusion our anarchy, our weakness, and the events of those days which we would willingly blot from the historic page; they alarm the Country Gentlemen—The Bishops and the rest of the Clergy assist them with all their might—With their natural weapon, hypocrisy, they take advantage of their credit with the people to extinguish the impression made upon their minds by our successes, and by those truths which we have proclaimed to the world.

You have not forgotten, you never can forget that the Government of England carried on a war against her Colonies, in opposition to the wishes of the people, and solely for the purpose of indulging the inclinations of
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O England! formerly the Land of Freedom—O England, the birth-place of Sidney, of Milton, what friend of man can now behold thee without a tear? who can view with unconcern the Tower of London transformed into a mansion not very dissimilar to that which the English themselves surveyed with such horror in Paris? who can see without emotion the Liberty of the Press invaded,
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and the freedom of opinion banished from the land where those two pillars of the public weal were erected by the tutelary genius of the Rights of Man? PRIESTLEY the Philosopher persecuted, PAYNE proscribed, COOPER and WALKER attacked even in their houses, for having dared to think that man was free.

Such is at this moment the condition of this once famous Island; the ascendancy of the Aristocracy, of the Nobility, of the Clergy, and of the rich Men is such in London, that our debates, read with such avidity, heard with such attention, and holding such rank in the history of this Country, are industriously banished from the capital.—Who would believe it?—The Inquisition of Spain never acted with more art than the Government of England does at this moment, to influence the opinion of the people, and to awaken in their minds their ancient prejudices against us, for the purpose of intercepting the light of truth in a Country which they would consign to ignorance and slavery.

The watchful conduct, however, of the Government of England, its fears and its jealousies, afford proofs of the progress which the opinions of the French Revolution have made.

It is not with his Wealth, his Priests, and his Lords, that Mr. Pitt will arm his soldiers and his sailors—He can only arm them by deluding the people.—We must therefore withdraw the veil from their eyes, and if a fleet should be detached against us, why should not the French Admiral address the English sailors in the following manner:—

Englishmen, men who have fought against the despotism of their king; who have driven from their country the armies of two of the most powerful military nations of Europe, are still forced to fight to defend their liberties. You ought to be well aware of the cause you are come to avenge. Have the French invaded your country? Have they interrupted your navigation, insulted your nation, refused to discharge towards your fellow-citizens the duties of hospitality? Have you, in the wide-spread extent of your empire, one charge to make against the agents of the Republic? No.—Since, then, nothing can
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justify the war into which you are dragged, and since without reason our blood is to tinge those waves which we ought to press in peace, and on which we ought to embrace as brothers—extend to us your hands in amity—Frenchmen have said, that “men are born equally free—that laws ought to have for their object the enjoyment of Liberty and Equality; these they have called the Rights of Man.”—O people of England! this is the crime of which the French have been guilty. It has armed against them Kings, Lords, Priests; for these men banish from their system of morality and politics all ideas of Equality. But the French appeal to your conscience, and to your unbiassed reason—Will you make war with them because they have promulgated your rights and their own? Is it true that the effects of these truths have enraged those who every where oppress and despise their species, and who dare to enjoy in the bosom of wealth those luxuries which are procured by the sweat and labour of their fellow creatures? But will you who are brought to fight us, you, whose strength and courage are about to be exerted on the side of avarice and ambition, will you assist those who despise you?—answer us,—what is your condition? what are your hopes? and what will be the effect of your endeavours, should you triumph, or otherwise? We will inform you. If we fail, Liberty will be banished from Europe, perhaps from the world for ever. If we succeed, you will be free; for it is for the Rights of Man that we contend, and if you are men, our victory will be your own. Speak now, do you wish to contend against us? answer us, are you our enemies, or our friends?

Perhaps this Address, if it were heard by the people of England, would terminate all our anxieties, and would attach to us even that Nation that now seems hostile to us. The conviction of those truths I have delivered has infused itself into the minds of many persons in England. Government will fear the disclosure of them—The event of a war will accelerate it.

This observation recalls me more immediately to the subject in discussion.

In recurring to the observations I have made, I can
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only discover additional motives to confirm me in my former opinion of the ultimate views of Mr. Pitt—he wishes to avert the consequences of our Revolution from England----he hopes, at least, by his armaments and his negotiations, to turn the current of the public dissatisfaction from a particular object by the expectation of a war, which he will not enter into till he has excited the ancient prejudices of the people of England, and established a malecontent party in France---I believe that he will be disappointed in both his expectations, particularly in that which relates to us—he judges our country by his own---France emancipated, France cannot be influenced by fear.----She will receive laws only from herself---one or two men govern *****---here the public opinion governs us.---In ***** two parties dispute the possession of power---in France, we contend only for the applause of the People.---In ***** Ministers are the rulers of the Nation---in France, they are but Clerks. Mr. Pitt acknowledges the Government only in his own popularity---in France, it is acknowledged in the Will of the People. I will attempt to develop the character of this man, whose errors may become, in the crisis, so fatal to the world. Let him attend to me—Let him know that there is no similitude between a country that oppresses Liberty and France, where Liberty appears on the horizon, for the first time, free from Aristocratic attachments, “*glittering like the morning star, full of life, and splendour, and joy.*”—Let him know that we fear not kings, and that if we suffer our late Monarch to exist, we will not permit him to make treaties that are not ratified by the nation.

Let him know that we can live in Peace with Kings, but that we can only fraternise with the people. Let him know that we will make peace only on conditions that are honourable to ourselves, and that shall confirm the independence of that People from whose shoulders we have removed the galling yoke. Let him know that we fear not War, and that the first gun fired on the seas will impose upon us the duty of emancipating Holland, Spain, and South America—a duty not above our courage and our resources, aided as we are in all those countries by the
evident

evident interests of the people, and by a majority that invites us thither.

In short, let him know that the Anarchists of every description are fallen into contempt; that their dupes will not long remain so; and that our agitations are like those of the Ocean;—the surface indeed is moved, but the mass is tranquil.

I now proceed to examine the consequences of the war with which we are threatened, and to reason upon the supposition that the war with England should draw us into a general war with all the powers of Europe.—Let not this truth alarm us; our interest requires, that in this struggle there should be no neutrals; and if we are obliged to it, I propose that we should make this general proclamation, addressed to all Nations—"That in a war of Kings against men, we can only acknowledge friends or enemies." Policy counsels this resolution, apparently desperate, but the motives for which I am now to explain: England is a power so preponderant in Commerce and Navigation, that other Nations are, as it were, the factors only of their business. France stands alone on her own industry and riches. But Spain, Portugal, and Holland, and the little Republics of Italy, traffic on the capital and produce of English industry; and the treasures of the New World, and those of Asia, are at this moment tributary to the active industry of the merchants and manufacturers of that Nation. Denmark, Sweden, and Russia, have an apparent fund of commerce in their naval stores, which seems peculiar to themselves. But this fund of commerce even is exchanged by the English merchants, nor is there a lucrative branch of traffic that is not carried on to the profit of this truly mercantile people.

I know that it is a bold and hardy enterprise to declare singly against a world of enemies. But if great hazards are connected with such an enterprise, it offers also great resources. Were we to attack the nations themselves, the proposition would be ridiculous, and would not merit a discussion; but the people would be in this war but a passive instrument, and as they must experience losses without indemnification, they would be most easily convinced

vinced that it was unjust, and their voices who fought us would at last join in our triumphs.—We have not sufficiently reflected on the advantages of nations who fight in a body, who make war for themselves, for whom it is a common cause. There is a use in recollecting, now Europe menaces us with a general war, what weak nations, when devoted, when resolved as we are, to live free or die, have done in circumstances nearly similar. A review of the courageous resistance of the Athenians, whose territory in extent and population did not equal the least of our Departments---of the terrible war they supported for thirty eight years against all the neighbouring nations---which was as fatal to Greece as to the Athenians themselves—is the greatest monument that History has transmitted us of the courage, the ferocity, and the genius of man---It is also a proof of what the genius of Liberty may effect.

A more recent example presents itself, that of the Dutch shaking off the yoke of Phillip II. "A little nook of land (says Voltaire) almost drowned in the sea, which subsisted by catching herrings, is become a formidable power; it checked Philip II. despoiled his successors of nearly all they possessed in the East-Indies, and in the end became their protectors." So much greatness was the work of Philip's persecution, our's shall be the fruit of the persecution of all the kings of Europe; but it will cost us our treasures! Be it so, if war impoverishes us, it will force us to change our manners, and put us on a par with the spirit of the Revolution. A sea war will bring our armies to the defence of our frontiers, and it is in these we shall be invincible; and if Spain, England, and Holland, attack us, Asia and America will call aloud to us. Let us vigorously push our enterprise into these rich countries. Let us recollect it was a Pope who gave America to Spain.

If we consider the vast field that this hardy resolution opens to the courage and activity of our sailors, the vast resources that it presents to you; if you rest your thoughts upon that multitude of vessels, richly freighted, which will be the frequent prey of your privateers; if in a sea war, you call together that crowd of wandering men, who are to be found in all the nations of Europe; if you adopt them
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and associate them in your enterprizes; if this nation, whose maritime commerce must be suspended the moment a war commences, directs its resources and enterprize towards the warlike operations of the Navy, in concert with the Government; if you attack at once with your whole force (for a naval war must be essentially offensive), the richest possessions of Spain, Portugal, Holland, and England, you will then see those Powers, astonished at their defeat, feel their resources drying up, for you will have struck the spring of their riches.

The credit of England rests upon fictitious wealth, the real riches of this people are scattered every where, and is essentially personal estate. Bounded in territory, the public fortune of England is found almost wholly in its Bank, and this edifice is totally supported by the wonderful activity of their naval commerce. Asia, Portugal, and Spain, are the most advantageous markets for the productions of English industry; we should shut these markets to the English by opening them to all the world.

We must attack Lisbon and the Brasils, and carry an auxiliary army to Tippoo Sultan.

Portugal, with respect to defence, is a nullity. A fleet which should penetrate the Tagus, after having exhausted the country by contributions, after having destroyed the arsenals, should terminate its successes by first taking and then liberating Brazil.

An expedition directed against the English East Indies would, at the same time, threaten the establishments of Holland, the important colony of the Cape of Good Hope, Batavia, Ceylon, &c. &c. There you would meet only with men enervated by luxury, soft beings that would tremble before the Soldier of Liberty.

The Spaniard bears in the recesses of his soul the mark of a high mind, which renders him worthy to be free; in Europe he would weakly defend the cause of the Bourbons; in America he calls to you, and you ought to march to Mexico, while you menace the English; for this mass of enemies will present you with a valuable advantage; that each will be forced to put itself on the guard, and you will no where have more than one at once to engage.

The Republics of Italy offer you maritime prizes, of which

which the loss will fall on the English commerce, from the superior interest of the London Merchants in their cargoes. The forces of these little States are nothing in themselves, and may, by falling into your hands, serve to assist and strengthen yours.

England, Spain, Holland, and Russia, present a considerable *numerical* force in ships, but I see only the English and the Russians who can act together.

Spain must be busied in the defence of her numerous possessions.

If you push the war in Zealand with vigour, you will nip the naval force of the Stadtholder in the bud, and the patriotic party, which has so long called you to its assistance, will, with your aid, soon prevent it from springing into strength.

If you direct a naval war as you ought, you will indemnify yourselves for the expences of a land war; and perhaps, after the examples of the Athenians and the Dutch, France, all powerful as she is in her armies, will be indebted for the consolidation of her liberties to her naval force.

All your foreign possessions are at this moment a surcharge to you, which cost you treasures, and return you none. If the English seize them, your captures will be lucrative on the other hand, and the emancipation of Mexico will balance the loss of a few little islands.

But your colonies will defend themselves with bravery, and it is very possible your enemies will fail in their enterprize, for the warlike spirit has already displayed itself; the civil war, and the forces which circumstances have obliged to support there, and those which you have recently sent, will put them in a respectable state of defence. I have this opinion, that the parties there will unite to remain Frenchmen, and that they seize this opportunity to prove their attachment to the mother country. If they prove ungrateful children, they neither merit your efforts nor your regret. If in the end the English become masters of your colonies, it will be forced to keep them, and this surcharge will weaken them, while your forces disengaged will secure ample possessions to you elsewhere.

I suppose that your enemies will attempt an invasion of your coast; do you doubt of their being repelled by our
brave

brave coast guards? England, threatened with an invasion, and having only her ships to defend her, will be obliged to keep at home a great part of her fleet and army for her internal defence.

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But the Russians—Will the Turks give no uneasiness to the Russians? and the Swedes, the only people who seem to hold out the hand to us; will they make no effort to stop the barbarians who threaten their liberty? In any case, the Russians and Dutch confederated, will be checked in the English ports by our fishing vessels, always in readiness to transport there one hundred thousand French: for by this expedition, we must terminate the quarrel, and form with the English a Treaty, which shall regulate the destiny of Nations, and found the Liberty of the World.

It results from the particular and general considerations to which we have called your attention, that constant and firm in your principles, you should avoid the provocation of a war, but that equally distant from every fear, you ought to be ready to repel all unjust aggressions; that the war with which you are menaced, should be fatal to those who shall provoke it, and that you should prepare to sustain yourselves with vigour against England and her allies.

I therefore propose to you to pass the following decree:

- I. To declare that the French are ready for War—ready to form an alliance with the English people.
- II. To order the equipment of *thirty* ships of the line, and *twenty-four* frigates. To put the coasts into a state of defence, and to send into all the maritime departments Commissioners, charged to superintend every thing that may assure success in a war.
- III. To examine the situation of the Agents of the French Republic with Foreign Powers, and to render their situation less precarious without delay.
- IV. To form a Committee of general Defence, taking three Members from each of the following Committees—the Marine, War, Diplomatic, Commercial, and Financial.

The Assembly adopted the last of KERSAINT's propositions, and referred the others to the examination of the Committee whose formation they had decreed.

THE END.